*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

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| Jeffrey C. Riley  *Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner |
| **Date:** | January 15, 2021 |
| **Subject:** | FY2021 Quarter 2 Report for Chronically Underperforming Schools |

This month, I am presenting the second of four quarterly progress updates to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) on the four chronically underperforming schools and their implementation of their school turnaround plans. These updates are focused on activities from November and December 2020. As described in the first quarterly report[[1]](#footnote-2), the narrative for this progress update has been provided by the School Empowerment Network, based on classroom observations led by that group during that timeframe. The third quarterly update will be presented in March 2021 and a final annual review will come in June 2021.

**Chronically Underperforming Schools**

In the fall of 2013, four schools were designated as chronically underperforming schools in response to their low performance and lack of improvement while in underperforming status: John P. Holland Elementary School (UP Academy Holland) and Paul A. Dever Elementary School (Dever) in Boston, Morgan Full Service Community School (Morgan) in Holyoke, and John Avery Parker Elementary School (Parker) in New Bedford.

**Learning Model**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the four schools designated as chronically underperforming began the 2020 – 2021 school year with students learning in either a fully remote or a hybrid (remote / in-person) learning model. Observations of instruction conducted by School Empowerment Network (SEN) in November of 2020 were done remotely. SEN reviewers observed remote, synchronous instruction in three of the four schools (Dever, UP Academy Holland, and Morgan). In the fourth school (Parker), SEN reviewers observed both remote and in-person instruction.

**Paul A. Dever Elementary School, Boston**

Information provided by School Empowerment Network

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength # 1

Positive Learning Environment

*Description*:

The newly appointed principal at Paul A. Dever Elementary School (Dever) has a clear vision for the school community which states that a positive learning environment enables students to productively engage with rigorous, standards-aligned curriculum. Teachers, like school leaders, articulate a set of beliefs about how students learn best. This includes creating a safe environment where students’ minds are ready and able to learn, students can engage in complex tasks, and they can develop and trust positive relationships between teachers, students, and family as motivators for student achievement.

School leaders have provided teachers with training in the brain science underpinning theories of social-emotional learning (SEL) and in specific strategies to support students’ social-emotional development. As a result, teachers implement SEL strategies in all classrooms.

Parents and students believe that students are well-supported and treated with care and respect by staff members.

Area of Strength # 2

Leveraging Resources and Assessment

*Description*:

School leaders have allocated resources to support their most vulnerable students. They have reevaluated and updated some students’ IEPs to address learning gaps. Using student assessment data and reallocating funds, school leaders implemented reading interventions, adjusted scheduling to allow for more intervention time and hired both a reading interventionist and an additional resource room teacher to provide intervention.

Core literacy instruction and intervention include systematic phonics-based instruction targeted to students’ learning needs. Dever staff schedule students for interventions based on the results of screening assessments.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus # 1

Pedagogy

*Description*:

Dever students are learning remotely at this time. Teachers use the Zoom platform as the main synchronous learning platform, supported by additional applications such as NearPod. Across classes, students are given opportunities to engage with grade-level content and skills. Student engagement in remote learning, however, varies across classes.

Teachers have made progress toward enacting the schoolwide beliefs about how students learn best. Improving consistency of instructional practices, however, should be an area of focus moving forward.

Area of Focus # 2

Teacher Support and Supervision

*Description*:

A teacher support and supervision system that provides regular feedback to all teachers is needed to increase the coherence and consistency of instructional practice, to support the continuous development of all Dever teachers, and to accelerate instructional improvement across grades and classes. Feedback to teachers should be grounded in a research-based teaching framework and should consistently focus on key teaching practices aligned to the instructional vision.

Area of Focus # 3

Assessment

*Description*:

School leaders have opted to utilize the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) assessments to determine student progress towards goals. Teachers use MAP data to create small groups for intervention work. In addition, teachers work in collaborative teams to analyze data and plan adjustments to whole group instruction. However, clear expectations for the use of daily assessment to inform instructional decision making are needed. Once in place, these expectations will increase the consistency of daily, class-level assessment from grade to grade and from class to class.

Additionally, moving forward school leaders should set expectations for clear, consistent feedback to students and families. Feedback practices, like daily assessment practices, currently vary from class to class. A goal here should be for students and families to be able to identify students’ short-term learning targets, current progress to those targets, and needed supports.

**UP Academy Holland, Boston**

Information provided by School Empowerment Network

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength # 1

Assessment

*Description*:

UP Academy Holland (UAH) teachers and school leaders utilize common assessments including both ANet and Quick Phonics Screener (QPS) and curriculum-based assessments to determine student progress toward goals. Teacher teams regularly analyze assessment data using well-established protocols. Curricula, instruction, and interventions are adjusted based on results of assessments.

In response to the shift to remote learning, teachers have adapted their daily assessment methods to ensure consistent, evidence-based teaching practices. Across classes, teachers frequently use checking for understanding (CFU) strategies which include “show call” and the Zoom platform chat function. In the short time since the school has shifted to remote learning, teacher teams have also researched online learning platforms and identified a variety (i.e., Desmos, EdLight, Flipgrid) which allow them to frequently and efficiently gather evidence of student learning.

Area of Strength # 2

High Expectations

*Description*:

UAH leaders communicate clear expectations for all members of the community. Members of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) utilize a normed process for observing classes and providing teacher feedback. As a result, feedback consistently aligns to school goals and instructional priorities. UAH leaders coach teachers to use the first weeks of the school year to establish consistent classroom routines, procedures, and expectations. As a result, even in this year of remote learning, consistent routines and procedures are evident across classes.

Teachers can name leaders’ expectations for instruction including providing student feedback. They also cite systems designed to ensure that teachers are supported to meet expectations. One such system is the “Drop Everything and Plan” (DEAP) system through which teachers meet daily with colleagues for collaborative instructional planning guided by a normed planning protocol. This system ensures that every teacher understands UAH expectations for planning.

School leaders have also established expectations for teacher outreach to families which include determining whether families have the resources they need for remote instruction and updating families frequently on learning goals and student progress. As a result, family members report that they know what their children’s learning goals are and they know what skills students need to improve on to reach those learning goals. Students, too, are able to cite very specific expectations teachers have for them.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus # 1

Curricula

*Description:*

UAH has selected and begun implementing the Expeditionary Learning (EL) curriculum in grades K through 4 this year–a challenge in a remote-learning environment. Nevertheless in many ELA classes, students engage with tasks which require higher-level thinking, are often complex (i.e., writing a poem, preparing a presentation), and require students to use several skills in concert.

Many UAH teachers are implementing this curriculum for the first time. Moving forward, school leaders should build teachers’ capacity to plan lessons that maximize learning time, in particular the amount of time students engage with the highest-level thinking related to the learning target. Teacher teams should plan into every lesson learning activities to extend learning for students working at or above grade level.

Area of Focus # 2

Pedagogy

*Description:*

In the short time since all UAH students shifted to remote learning, teachers have shown energy, resourcefulness, and intentionality by researching and identifying numerous online instructional applications and remote-learning platforms. Learning remotely is qualitatively different from learning in person. With the help of these resources, however, teachers are ensuring that most students are engaged in grade-level work for large portions of each lesson.

While progress has been made relative to this indicator, a continued focus on pedagogy is needed. School leaders should ensure that lessons led by co-teaching pairs are planned to maximize the impact of both adults on learning. Teacher teams should further develop practices that maintain consistent student engagement in lessons and consistent student collaboration levels while in Zoom breakout rooms.

**Morgan Full Service Community School, Holyoke**

Information provided by School Empowerment Network

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength # 1

Leveraging Resources

*Description:*

Morgan Full Service Community School (Morgan) leaders have allocated resources to support their schoolwide vision, values, and goals in alignment with their vision for a positive, inclusive, and anti-racist school culture. For example, they devoted professional development (PD) time prior to the start of the school year and weekly professional learning time to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) training. The school schedule includes uninterrupted blocks of time for PD and teacher collaboration. As a result, school leaders have had time--even as they work to support students, families, and teachers with the shift to remote learning--to establish the school’s instructional vision and beliefs about how students learn best.

In addition, school leaders have scheduled students daily for both core instruction blocks and targeted, small-group skills work. By scheduling paraprofessionals to facilitate some interventions, school leaders have tapped an underutilized school resource, increased the number of intervention groups, and reduced teacher-to-student ratio in some groups.

Area of Strength # 2  
Curricula and Assessment

*Description*:

*Curricula -* Morgan leaders have communicated clearly to staff about their expectation to consistently use high-quality, district-endorsed curricula. As a result, across classes the written curricula, texts, daily objectives, and learning tasks are aligned to grade-level standards. Teachers’ implementation of the curricula is not yet as consistent as it needs to be, however, to accelerate all students’ learning. Continued support of teachers’ efforts to maintain rigor while implementing the curricula is needed.

*Assessment –* All Morgan students took screening assessments at the beginning of this year to assess current levels of achievement and what learning losses, if any, they had experienced in the past year. Screener assessment results were utilized to program students into small groups for Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention. Consequently, teachers in small-group interventions target instruction to students’ present levels of performance.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus # 1

Pedagogy

*Description*:

In preparation to open this school year, Morgan leaders engaged in a process over the summer to develop Morgan’s schoolwide set of beliefs about how students learn best and a vision for high-quality instruction. They codified the beliefs and vision in a staff-facing document, the Morgan Handbook. School leaders normed staff on those beliefs and on a few teaching strategies aligned to the beliefs so that school leaders and teachers now articulate a shared set of beliefs about how students learn best. This is clear progress. However, implementation of instructional practices aligned to the beliefs is not yet consistent across classes.

Teachers need support to consistently implement key instructional practices. This support must include frequent, written feedback. It must also include exemplars and non-exemplars (examples of what high-quality versions of the practices look like and examples of what low-quality versions of the practices look like, respectively) along with modeling of practices.

Area of Focus # 2

High Expectations

*Description***:**

With the development of the Morgan Handbook, school leaders have codified a set of instructional practice targets for teachers. However, across classes, instructional practice does not yet consistently reflect the targets identified in the handbook. This is due to the fact that the targets were only recently developed and communicated to staff. More work and systems building remains to be done for teachers to implement these consistently as non-negotiable expectations.

Moving forward, Morgan leaders must establish systems of accountability which are robust enough to ensure that all teachers are consistently working to meet instructional practice targets. If established, these systems can increase staff commitment to and accountability for schoolwide priorities and drive whole-school improvement.

Area of Focus # 3

Curriculum and Assessment

*Description:*

While checking for understanding (CFU) practices are evident in some classes, there is no evidence of mid-lesson adjustments to instruction based on CFUs. In addition, there is not evidence of intentional use of daily end-of-lesson assessments (i.e., exit tickets) to determine whether every student has met the day’s learning target. This kind of daily assessment usage is especially important in a remote-learning environment--where it is much more challenging for teachers to informally gauge student progress to learning targets.

**John Avery Parker Elementary School, New Bedford**

Information provided by School Empowerment Network

**School Strengths**

Area of Strength # 1

Positive Learning Environment

*Description:*

John Avery Parker School (Parker) leaders articulate a vision for a positive, welcoming, and supportive school culture and for the “marriage of culture and academics.” This vision is rooted in the beliefs that Parker students have the "will" to learn and learn best when teachers help them develop the "skill" to self-regulate. Notably, school leaders have selected core curriculum in ELA and math that align to their vision for the community. These curricula provide students with opportunities to simultaneously practice academic and social-emotional-behavioral skills by sharing personal experiences, engaging in discourse, and working collaboratively with other students. Parker leaders have provided teachers with extensive professional development to support them to teach students social-emotional-behavioral skills and to respond to student needs using trauma-informed strategies.

Parker students are learning in a hybrid (remote/in-person) model at this time. This has meant many fewer hours of in-person time for teachers to build relationships with students this year. Even in the remote environment, however, teachers were observed consistently enacting the vision using “responsive classroom” strategies. These include setting clear expectations for each activity, using growth mindset language and asking students to respond to other students.

As a result, in-person and remote learning environments were positive, respectful, and focused. Students and family members express that students are safe, respected, and welcomed at their school.

Area of Strength # 2

Teacher Teams and Distributed Leadership

*Description:*

Parker teachers engage in structured, data-based collaborations that promote the achievement of school goals. Every teacher meets weekly with a team during teacher collaboration time (TCT) to engage in collaborative planning. During TCT, teachers develop unit and lesson plans aligned to both grade-level curricula and to the Parker learning cycle expectations.

In six-week cycles, teachers in TCT analyze student work samples and data from grade-level and schoolwide assessments. Based on data analysis, they create groups within their classes, program students for interventions, and, in some cases, adjust core instruction to address learning gaps.

In addition, school leaders have established three separate leadership teams: an instructional leadership team; a social-emotional learning leadership team; and a family and community engagement leadership team. Leadership teams monitor data related to their goals and may make adjustments to strategies to ensure goals are met.

**Areas of Focus**

Area of Focus # 1

Pedagogy

*Description:*

Over the past three years, the Parker team has made progress in building collaborative, inclusive, and supportive learning environments. This fall, however, students at Parker are learning in a hybrid model and remote learning has presented challenges for teachers to engage students in student-to-student discourse and collaborative explorations. It has also constrained teachers’ opportunities to utilize pedagogical moves and learning structures that had become hallmarks of Parker classrooms. Gallery walks, small group work on the rug, and math congress, for example, cannot be utilized as they were as recently as last March because of social distancing requirements.

Teachers continue to work to align instruction with the schoolwide beliefs about how students learn best. At the same time, math explorations that formerly took place on the classroom rug with groups of students seated around chart paper now must happen over Zoom or at a safe social distance. Gallery walks that formerly took place along a corridor with students moving and working in small teams, now take place online using platforms like Google classroom. The result is less spontaneous student discourse across classes, less collaborative problem solving, and more alternating share outs of ideas and/or answers. To counteract the propensity to rely on direct instruction and direct questioning in the remote environment, school leaders should support teachers to enact facilitative teaching strategies (group work, write-pair-share, turn-and-talk).

Area of Focus # 2

Curriculum

*Description:*

Parker leaders adopted a new ELA core curriculum, Wit and Wisdom, this year to emphasize rigorous habits and higher-order thinking skills. Teachers’ planning from this curriculum is guided by a schoolwide framework - “the planning for learning cycle” -  which calls for lessons to include a complex task, activities to engage/ignite/hook student interest, and strategies to hold every student accountable for grappling with the task. While the newly selected ELA curriculum and planning process includes more opportunities for students to engage with complex tasks, additional focus on teachers’ implementation of this new curriculum is needed to increase student ownership of learning and student engagement in the hybrid learning environment.

1. The first quarterly report for FY2021 can be found here: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2021/2020-11/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)